Nature-Culture Dialectics: Folk Literature of J&K in an Eco-critical Frame

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**ABSTRACT**

Man in his blind race to gain superiority over nature, has pushed mankind into such a situation where apocalypse seems to be the only end. The planet Earth has been created beautifully balanced to cater to the needs of all the species living on it. Man intervened and interfered with its process and disturbed the life cycles of all the living and non-living components of this Earth. The major reason of this attenuating attitude seems to be his distancing from the traditional wisdom that he got from the folk sources. Folk literature has always talked of this balance between all forms of life. It has always raised human consciousness of those societies which believed in this form of knowledge. Raising consciousness of the folk has been an amazing style of folk literature. Today, in the twenty first century, when the selfishly sown seeds have fully grown into a shadeless and fruitless tree, literature is being looked at as a solution to teach and preach. Folklores are being revisited and re-studied for solace. This paper proposes to study the folklore of J&K in the eco-critical framework. The texts taken include varieties of folklore in translation to reach a conclusion; proverbs, songs & folk tales.

**INTRODUCTION**

Not only scientists all over the world have been raising alarms for saving the decaying environment and consequent global warming that is set to create havoc for life on this earth but the layman has also realized that the selfish approach of man is certainly leading to his doom. Man is rarely satisfied with the fulfillment of his needs. It is proved that all human extinctions, ecological imbalance and environmental pollution on this planet can be directly attributed to human activity of development. It is well-perceived that literature may either be taken as the index and mirror of society, mapping all the socio-cultural, political, religious ripples that rise on its surface or a model of life.

Ever since man’s creation on this Earth he has been busy creating a paradise here by striving towards regaining the lost perfection. He, on the other hand, tried to achieve the progress in material terms; on the other hand he tried to conquer spiritual frontiers also. He even tried to re-invent God and his relation to man. Literature created by him stands a witness to his approach towards this world which can be studied to unveil the dynamics of his mind. Folklore is a mirror to the earlier human life on this planet. Indu Roy Choudhary defines it as a set of "culture, complex traditions and social beliefs of the common people" which can be studied to unfold a rich legacy and is a reliable index to our past (Chaudhary 5). Shanker Sen Gupta calling it "the pragmatic expression of psychology of man" (Sen 4) finds it a decisive factor in "the process of description, analysis and final definition of human culture"(Sen 8). After a close reading of folk literatures the myth of today’s world stands exposed that earlier man was primitive. Certainly his mind was as fertile as is found today. He was as conscious of many issues as we are today; rather he raised timely alarms so that the things remain in order. Issues like environmental concerns, human ethics, women empowerment etc. find ample space in the folklores though in a different shape.

In this paper I propose to study the representative folklore of the State of Jammu and Kashmir which comprises of three regions viz. Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh within the eco-critical framework. An effort will be made to locate the texts under study as eco-texts as per the standards laid down by eco-critics, with a special focus on animal-man relationship as nature- culture dialectics. In Glotfelty’s words “Eco-criticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (The Ecocriticism Reader xix). Camilo Gomides defines eco-criticism as a "field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations" (16). The texts shall be investigated as per the questions raised by Glotfelty in The Ecocriticism Reader: nature represented, role of the physical setting and consistence of the values expressed with ecological wisdom (xviii-xix).

**DISCUSSION**

Men of Letters have always expressed their concern for nature and worries of de-shaping the eco-structure in various ways: Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Frost, , Ruskin etc. are few names to mention. But it is only relatively recently in late 20th century that this canon gained momentum as a renewed eco-poetic voice in an organized theory called Eco-criticism.

Eco-criticism as a literary theory got a shape in 1966 in Cherryl Glotfelty’s The Ecocriticism Reader though the seeds of this branch of study were sown much earlier, though scattered and incoherent, in the writings of William Rueckert who used the term for the first time in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism” in 1978 and in Joseph Meeker’s “The Comedy of Survival” in 1974; Lawrence Buell, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth,
Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen a. Love are the some other most widely known eco-critics. Eco-criticism is concerned about the relationship of man with his physical environment as reflected in literature. It examines whether the current issues of environmental importance have been adequately represented in literature.

Today, there is a consensus that environment is the biggest concern of 21st century. Not only scientists all over the world have been raising alarms for saving the decaying environment and consequent global warming that is set to create havoc for life on this earth but the layman has also realized that the selfish approach of man is certainly leading to his doom. Man is rarely satisfied with the fulfillment of his needs. It is proved that all human extinctions, ecological imbalance and environmental pollution on this planet can be directly attributed to human activity of development. Barry Commoner in his book Making Peace with the Planet finds a perpetual conflict between ‘manmade technosphere’ that de-sacralizes nature and ‘natural ecosphere’ that avenges through disasters. It is well-perceived that literature may be taken as the index and mirror of society, mapping all the socio-cultural, political, religious ripples that rise on its surface or a model of life. Glotfelty in “The Strong Green Thread” (TSGT) observes:

Literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact in a perpetual dance…Literature acts on people, and people act on the world.

A study of folklore gives us an insight into the socio-economic condition of the people, their intellectual achievement, social norms, priorities and concerns. Studying folklore means searching roots or knowing oneself (Sen, 13). Across the ages, literature has been showing its deep concern for man-nature relationship, for honoring its sanctity and preserving its pristine beauty. All folk literatures are replete with this concern and have been raising the social consciousness by portraying nature, animals, birds, flowers, forests etc. to bring man close to nature and grow an ever-growing relationship that fosters a better understanding between the two worlds.

Let me begin with a study of Dogri folklore. Dogri is the constitutionally recognized language of Jammu province of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. The Jamwal Dynasty of this region pushed the boundaries of this state to the China borders and purchased the Kashmir Region from the British and carved out the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Though warriors yet Dogras in general remained a peace loving community living in close association with nature. The Emersonian conviction of Barry Commoner that ‘Everything is connected to everything else’ i.e. interdependence of all forms of life on this earth underlines the Dogra way of life. Though Dogras have been a nature-loving community yet hunting remained their favorite pastime. But Dogri folklore and rituals promoted eco-ethics by preaching animal, birds’ and plant worship. It is sacred to plant a sapling, water a tree, feed birds daily etc. We often hear our elders advising us to plant at least one Peepal tree in our life, not to cut its branches, water it every day etc. simply for the reason that it is useful to the atmosphere. It is a routine to feed dogs, cows and even ants every day. Any Dogri ritual is incomplete if the share of prepared food is not offered to the crows; even snakes are offered milk. The sparrows are fed everyday so that they don’t meet extinction, a concern projected in 20th century by Nissim Ezekiel in his poem Sparrows. Shivnath while commenting on the richness of Dogri folk literature writes: “This folk literature is healthy and strong because of its closeness to the earth.” (Shivnath 9)

The Dogri folkwriter has been attracted by the vivid natural beauty that finds immense appreciation in his creation. Overcast sky, rain, moon, snow and birds like the sparrow hawk, cuckoo, peacock, nightingale, red-legged Patridge etc are inseparable from the Dogri folk songs. Sometimes the love laden heart of the beloved rises above the clouds to call her lover back home, as is found in this folk song where alliteration and striking rhyme add to the beauty of expression in addition to the description of seasons of various parts of Jammu:

Jammu diya kandi ’ya barkha lagi’ di tey  
Dhren pawa de n paley, o showinki’ya chambe de’ya  
Char chofere ucchade ucchade  
Chhai gey baddlu ka’ley, o showinki’ya chambe de’ya  
Bad’len kola bi uchhda hoi hoi,  
Man de’ya da tu’gi aaley, o showinki’ya chambe de’ya

It’s been pouring in the plains of Jammu,  
And snowing on the peaks, O lover of Chamba!  
All around rising high,  
Are cast clouds dark, O lover of Chamba!  
Rising yet higher above the clouds,  
My heart calls you, O lover of Chamba!

Dogri folk literature is fully representative of the life of the people. It contains everything from the ideals, traditions and beliefs of the community to the vignettes of day to day domestic and social life (Shivnath 11). Let me illustrate this argument with an example of this Dogri folksong, which is a dialogue between the hero, a king and the heroine, a queen & clearly delineates the ideal man-nature closeness. This folksong can adequately be studied with eco-critical framework as it embodies the concern of the eco-critics that man is just one part of his immediate environment and has got no right to reduce the richness and diversity of life forms through his interference to satisfy his insatiable needs.

In this song the king is preparing to go for hunting the peacock of Green Gardens and tells the queen to accompany him in this masculine sport. The queen requests the king not to hunt birds especially the Peacock of the green garden because she feels a blood relation between her and him and rising above the pretensions of manmade society she even goes on to call him her mother’s son hence declaring oneness with the animal world. Here the song brings down the binary opposition between human and non-human entity through the Queen’s establishing a spiritual chord with the birds. Here is an extract:

Bharian handookan raja chale’ya shakar,  
maari lyowma saille baa’gen da more.  
Neyin tus maare’yo raja chidiyan te totey,  
Neyin tus maare’yo saille baugen da more.  
Ke kicch lagde rani chidiyan te totey,  
Ke kicch lagda saille baugen da more  
“Sassu de Jaay’ye mere chidiyan te tote,  
Amma da Jaaya saille baa’gen da more”

(Transliteration)

Hunting goes the King with the guns loaded,  
To hunt and get the peacock of gardens green.
“Don’t you kill Raja sparrows and parrots, Don’t you kill the peacock of gardens green!”

“What to you are, Rani, sparrows and parrots, Who is to you, the peacock of gardens green.”

Sparrows and parrots are my mother-in-law’s kids, My mother’s son is green gardens’ peacock.

(Transcreation)

In the later part of the song when the king insists that the Queen should accompany him during the hunt that speaks of his masculinity, she categorically refuses to watch this power exhibition which has led to the undue pampering of male chauvinism by the silence of women. When the king comes back after hunting the Peacock and tells her to cook it, we find Rani refusing to do so on pretext of her ill-health.

“Lakke gi peerh meri jindu gi peerhan
Me’thon ni ban’da saile baa ‘gen da more. ”

“Strain in the back, the whole body aches
I can’t cook Raja, peacock of gardens green.”

(Transcreation)

And we find that by the time the King cooked it and proudly offered this to her to eat the food as an outcome of his victory, the Queen had killed herself as she could not bear this separation from the Peacock. There is clearer, deeper and sharper suggestion that man can’t survive alienated from nature and also that all life is a part of an Oversoul; one needs to identify it and transcend beyond the self for oneness with nature.

Glotfety observes that nature and culture are distinct identities. Nature is non-human whereas Culture is a human construct. The human progress necessitates the subjugation of nature. Dogri folklore seems to be conscious of human dependence on nature and that life on the earth is an interconnected web. The Peacock symbolizes nature while the King is culture and his passion to hunt symbolizes exploitative human progress. Eco-critics see this culture as “the Other” in relation to the natural and the non-human. The Queen understands this complexity and like an eco critic pushes an agenda which involves the realization by the humans’ of their violent attitude to nature, and instead pleads for a sense of responsibility towards other forms of life on the earth. Also, in this song woman has been projected as protector and preserver as opposed to a man’s essential instinct to dominate and exploit the Other, in this case the Peacock, a symbol of Nature, hence bringing eco-feminism in play.

An inverted portrayal of characters is found in a Dogri folk tale titled A Lesson for the King (Pukhruen Di Sikh) which is the story of a doting Raja and his capricious Rani who wants “a palace with walls lined with colorful feathers of birds” for her. Though the Raja protests the required slaughter of thousands of birds but he had to initiate the process as the adamant Rani is bent upon getting the palace built. He summons the king of the birds and he apologizes for the delay in reporting because he was busy in a census of human beings in the kingdom carried out by the birds and he has found astonishing results. He replied “females far outnumber males.” The King got excited to know how was that possible as the last year’s survey revealed more no. of males than that of females, the bird replied that they had counted “those males who always act according to the wishes of their wives, among females.

What sort of a man is he who remains a slave to his wife, doing her bidding?” ( Shivnath 2001, 53-54 )

Dogri literature is quite responsive to its environment. This tale again raises the issue of man-nature relationship; of human cravings for material fulfillment beyond their requirements. Man has always exploited nature to fulfill his petty interests. Mass murder of birds may lead to the extinction of entire species, genocide but the Rani, blinded by the self-centeredness, does not care for this. So, the tale-teller raises man’s consciousness to re-think such actions. Greg Garrard has talked about pastoral ecology which states that undisturbed pristine nature is harmonious and balanced. Reason distinguishes man from beasts but he, guided by the limitless passion of progress, has lost reason and has become more unreasonable even than animals and birds. A lesson by the lower creatures sets us to re-consider our approach to other forms of life. A twentieth century poet Nissim Ezekiel also shares the same concern in his poems. Look at the poem Squirrel where a squirrel needs no physical caressing but a concern for its survival though a breathing space between human and non-human world. In Sparrows he hints that the number of these birds which used to be an all-time companion of man in his house it at the verge of extinction: “… and then I face, The facts- the mating and the nest, Primeval root of all the rest (104). Even in Jammu once their chirrup was a permanent wake-up call for the elders and their quarell a fun for children. Their hard toil to find a place to settle their nest in the roof of our houses has now become absent from our life because of their fast decreasing number. Dogri folk Literature, recognizing its responsibility, served as a platform for raising alarms against eco-apocalypse and called for a change in man’s attitude to nature and all other living beings by adhering to the principle of ‘deep ecology’ as suggested by Arne Naess and George Sessions. In any way it engages itself with responsibility and question of eco-ethics.

Let us turn to Dogri proverbs and sayings which are another storehouse of wisdom and beliefs of the people. “They enshrine a simple philosophy of life derived direct from daily living.” ( Shivnath 20) Through them the collective wisdom and enshrined morals percolated down to posterity. The Dogri folklorists preached eco-ethics through this genre also. Look at this Dogri saying which goes as:

“Ba’reh mageir, kan-ken de dher” (Transliteration)
Raining in Jan-Feb brings heaps of grain.
(Transcreation)

This means that either shrinking or prolonging of the seasons is not good for life on the earth. And this is what modern man’s roar is all about. Barry Commoner found that if one (manmade techno sphere) desacralizes nature, the other (natural ecosphere) takes revenge by disasters or change of seasons.

Another proverb glorifies and promotes agriculture probably for its closeness to nature and that people should cultivate land for the self-sufficiency of the state and sustenance of country life and rituals. Moreover, being entrepreneurial in nature, it is preferred to govt. service which is perceived as a form of slavery.

Uttam Kheti, maddham bopar,
Nikhkiddha chakari, bhikkh duhar (Transliteration)
Farming is the best, next is the trade,
In another Vaakh she talks of the connection of living and non-living objects, union of life forms to non-life forms: that all are parts of the Creation and dependent on each other, that ‘everything is connected to everything else’.

So when the sun of pure consciousness shines, 
The world of living and lifeless things, 
The universe and whatever exists, 
Are, in the Supreme, seen as one. (Vakh 33)

Kashmiri folk literature that abounds in the tales of man – nature relationship, is known for its eco-centric perspectives. Its folk tales have been the source of instruction to the masses regarding a harmonious relation with nature. It establishes that it is not the failure of our ecosystem but the deterioration of our ethical systems that has raised alarms for human life on this earth; restoring them is the only way out. Teaching by the birds, as has been discussed above in a Dogri tale, is very prominent in this tale that talks of human culture of greed at the cost of other lives. The Lucky Bird talks of a tired woodcutter who is helped by a bird who felt sad at his miserable condition and laid a golden egg by his side. Innocent yet foolish, this Woodcutter hands over the egg to the merchant for a gold coin. Guided by the merchant’s greed and cunningness, the Woodcutter catches the bird through deception to sell it to the shopkeeper for five gold coins. The bird is bound to die after being caught by a human. But before its death the lucky bird makes the Woodcutter repent on what he had done, and directs him to his (the bird’s) home. Here the solidarity of the bird’s family is contrasted to the befooling of the Woodcutter by his fellow human being, the merchant. Anyhow, the bird re-lives but the story ends with a note on the inter-connections of human and non-human life which are equally significant for each other. The bird consoles the Woodcutter over the loss but tells him that the lucky birds don’t stay with them who are greedy. Man’s greed has compromised with all other forms of life on this earth, calling for eco-apocalypse. This story uses rizhoma as a useful tool to dismantle and invert the hierarchical thought that man is supreme because of his logic; the defeat of his wisdom by the birds is a rhizomatic thought that Deleuze and Guattari have talked about.

The Charmed Ring, a narrative marble, presents another human-non human interaction. Here animals are presented in sharp contrast to humans who honor and maintain human values like loyalty, persistence and gratefulness enacted through the story of a human and three non-human characters. The story opens with the kindness of the merchant’s son saving the three animals a dog, a cat and a snake by spending all the money that his father had given him to “try his luck” in trade (Knowles 20). Even after being chastised by his father and ordered to “live in the stables and repent of your folly” (Knowles 20) and prohibited to enter his house, the son does not leave the animals. These animals “would follow him about during the day, and sleep by him at night; the cat used to sleep at his feet, the dog at his head, and the snake over his body, with its head hanging on one side and its tail on the other” (Knowles 21). The story goes on to subvert the myth of human superiority over the non-human forms. The snake, whose species is always projected as ungrateful creatures, is deeply engrossed in finding ways of repaying the kindness done to him. He even does not hesitate to advice him to demand from his father Raja Indrasha, his most prized possessions, the “ring on your right hand, and the famous pot and spoon which you possess” (Knowles 21) as these two things will compensate for the loss done to the protagonist. These magical gifts provide him with all the luxuries and comfort of life like palatial house.

Vandana Shiva, an eco-feminist agrees that “The destruction of organic links with the soil also leads to the destruction of organic links within society” (111). Proverbs also promoted a life style compatible to the seasons. Anything anti-seasonal may lead to deterioration of man’s health. Proverbs served as a potent medium of this instruction and memory was central to it. E.g.

Sohey sauna te barsanti nau’hna (Transliteration) 
Sleep in summers, bathe in rains (rainy season) 

Further:

Jettha Harra kukhen, sauna bhndron rukkhen
Be indoor in Jyeshth and Aashahr,
Sleep under the trees in Shrawan

The folk literature of Kashmir, the Paradise on Earth, amply exhibits eco-friendly approach of the people who were conscious of the importance of environment and ecology around them and perhaps could foresee the future hazards if not taken care of well in time. Can anyone forget Nund Reshi’s well known saying?

“Aen poshi teli yeli vaen posh”
“Food will last as long as forests last”

The above quoted verse is undoubtedly a clear and open indication of his innate foresight and intuitive knowledge. He uttered these words six centuries ago even before the present concept of ecological balance was born and the UN plans turned into hectic efforts for maintaining the ecological balance and upholding the eco-system. Nund Reshi believes that forests temper the climate, help cool the atmosphere and maintain the parabolic cycle of water, clouds, rain and snow, rivers, lakes and oceans. For him the forests and the rivers, lakes and oceans. For him the forests and the

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and beautiful wife till an ogress, in order to help a love-sick prince, manages to get hold of the ring. The dog and the cat swing into action to re-possess the ring and restore it to their true companion. The story narrates how the cat, despite various obstacles, manages to recover the ring first from the ogress who had swallowed it, then from the fish and finally from the kite, and help the merchant’s son recover his lost house and wife. This Kashmiri tale beautifully illustrates the importance and place given to nature in people’s daily lives. Killing of animals, pet or wild has been condemned with a message that the saving of all other life forms on this earth would certainly make the life of man more comfortable and meaningful as happened with the merchant’s son. It also privileges eco-ethics over the importance accorded to the material achievement by the human world. Sacrificing the entire money for the sake of animals’ lives by the protagonist contradicts the modern approach of subjecting the entire non-human world to exploitation and violence for the material gains. It establishes the relevance of studying folk literature in the twenty-first century.

Let me conclude with an example from Ladakhi folk song. Ladakh, another part of Kashmir and a cold desert, is known for its geographical setting. The warmth traced in its literature for all kinds of life on this land defeats the physical cold that freezes everything with its temperature dipping down to as low as -35° Celsius. Ladakh is a land where Buddhism has been a way of life since ages. Buddha preached compassion for all living forms on this earth hence creating an empowered and peaceful society where violence finds no place. Many Ladakhi proverbs incorporate eco-wisdom and their regular use generates an everlasting consciousness. I was personally fascinated when an elderly lady prohibited me to walk on green grass and quoted the saying: ‘Washing clothes near a water spring is thought to be a crime. The folkwriter of this song chosen for study consciously incorporates eco-consciousness to strengthen the message of non-violence towards animal world, especially wild life.

This song beautifully narrates a story of man’s cruelty through a mother Ibex’s mouth as an advice to her children to avoid going down the hills. The kids have asked the mother how her body had lost its natural color and turned red.

“Ngai amma dan’mo ngerang thib chik-chik song”
O my mother! Your all body color is gone.

The Mother Ibex pretends that her rolling in the red soil of the plains has made her red whereas actually she has been wounded by a hunter there. She advises them to avoid going to the plains which are easily accessible to men. Rueckert observes: “In ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (113). Man is an enemy of animal world because he kills them without even considering that all living forms have significance on this earth. So, mother Ibex never wants her kids leave the cliff and get hunted by men. This also means that leaving ones habitat means nothing but extinction. By constructing a touching mother-child human-like story of the animal world the folk writer’s message is quite clear: wild life needs man’s compassion. It is this approach that has made Ladakh an open sanctuary with the entire landscape rich in wildlife.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion establishes this fact that the folklore of the State of Jammu and Kashmir is rich in eco-ethics and satisfies all the standards laid down by the eco-critics to be read as an eco-text. In all the texts taken for study we find that nature, in any form, is not only a passive stage on which the drama of life is acted upon, it is rather an active player reciprocating the actions of man. So we see that the conventional wisdom of folk literature incorporates the concern for preserving the planet, not only for its beauty but for its role in human life; wild life needs to be protected as it is significant in the sustenance of life cycle on the Earth, forests ensure safe future for man, disturbed seasons might prove fatal etc. Our ancestors spread this eco-consciousness through folk-literature which proved to be the most potent vehicle of awareness because of its oral nature. Literature had been raising alarms much before the other studies could notice that human development has occurred at the cost of environment.

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